The Three Tank Platoon, A Consideration For Army XXI

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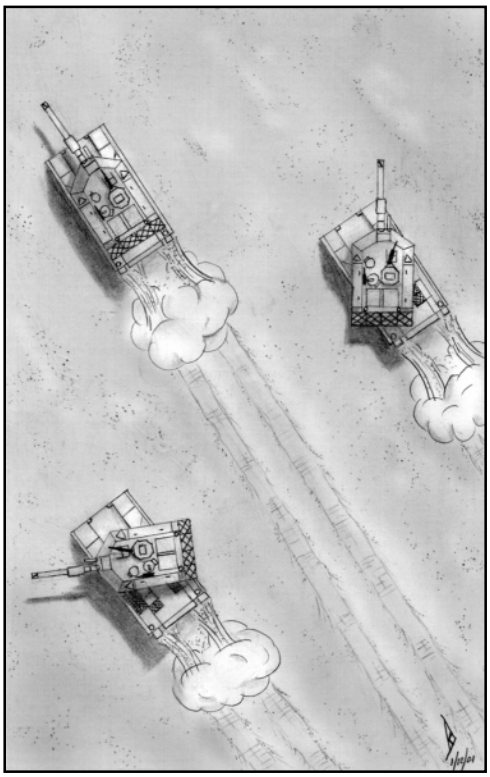

Art by SGT Benjamin S. Ormand

With the advent of the new Army XXI heavy division and General Shinseki's lighter brigade initiative, the U.S. Army takes a major step toward the creation of smaller, but more lethal and flexible formations for achieving victory on the battlefields of the 21st century. This new design is intended to yield a force that is better suited to responding to a wider spectrum of conflict than today's existing formations.

This trend in force restructuring creates other opportunities for re-engineering divisional sub-formations while enhancing overall combat effectiveness. One such opportunity would be a shift from a four-vehicle armored platoon to one founded on three armored vehicles. This transformation offers a force package design which, although revolutionary in nature, hones the application of the armored force on the battlefield, strengthens combat leadership roles, and realizes training and cost efficiencies. This radical change in force structure and employment doctrine would have a dramatic effect, both on the Active Component (AC) and the Reserve Component (RC) armored forces.

The current family of M1 main battle tanks provides a combat platform unmatched in the history of the U.S. armored corps and is a catalyst for this force structure change. This combat system, combined within a three-tank platoon structure, offers the U.S. Army the chance to refine the armor platoon into an organization that operates and trains aggressively with a high degree of firepower and mobility, while at the same time reducing operational and logistical costs. Ultimately, the three-tank platoon offers the Army the opportunity to concentrate on the development of junior armor leaders and optimizes limited training time. These advantages enable the Army to build cohesive units ready to face the battlefield challenges of today and tomorrow.

The most critical component of any combat organization and its underpinning technology is its method of employment. By definition and doctrinally, "the tank platoon is organized to fight as one maneuver element, not as two separate sections. The tank platoon moves, attacks, defends and performs other essential tasks to support the company team's mission." Command and control of the three-vehicle M1A2 tank platoon flattens the leadership challenge for the platoon's leaders and focuses leadership at the critical point within a unitary organization. Platoon gunnery, tactical training, logistics functions, and manning requirements are examples of issues that can be simplified by the adoption of the three-vehicle tank platoon.

Recent experiments conducted by the PLT/CO/TM Branch, Doctrine Division, Directorate of Training and Doctrine Development (DTDD), at the U.S. Army Armor Center have shown that the M1A2 is capable of operating on wider frontages at a faster pace than previous main battle vehicles. This wider battlespace offers the armor leader new challenges in command and control that could be overcome by reorganization into three-vehicle platoons. With three tanks, the armor platoon leader could better control the movement and fire of his unit while maintaining full observation in his platoon battlespace. The DTDD experiments showed that although "digitized units will communicate digitally before the direct fire fight, once close combat with the enemy begins, voice communications rule." We can infer from this statement that, despite the advent of faster paced situations catalyzed by the M1A2's capabilities and digitization, reliance on tried and true *visual and formation* techniques of command and control will be employed in future operations.

The three-tank platoon enhances the combination of digitization and currently applied techniques of command and control by demanding less of the platoon leadership while still supporting the advancement in systems through simplification of the battlespace. Simply stated, during the heat of a direct fire engagement, in rough terrain, or under conditions of reduced visibility, the platoon leader is better able to see and direct the efforts of his unit. Conversely, his subordinate vehicles can better orient on his direction of travel or main effort.

Gunnery and tactical employment are enhanced by the systems that the M1A2 fields. With the M1A2, direct fire engagements may be acquired and served faster and more effectively then ever before. Based on these refinements, the withdrawal of the fourth vehicle from the tank platoon speeds individual, crew, and platoon level gunnery and tactical training without reducing firepower. This advantage is especially useful for RC formations that have limited amounts of collective training time throughout the year. This lack of sufficient collective training time is a major weakness of Reserve Component armor combat units and has the resultant negative impact on leader development. Changing to three-vehicle platoons would alleviate this shortfall in collective combat training opportunities by simplifying gunnery and optimizing use of training time. The three-vehicle concept places the platoon leader at the spearhead of his platoon for gunnery and collective training, leading from the position of greatest maneuver and fire opportunity. He becomes the main focus of the platoon's efforts.

Logistically, support of the three-vehicle unit provides the platoon-through-division-level structure with a

simplification of the entire armor-related support package. Platoon leaders, relieved of a fourth vehicle, can focus their maintenance efforts on three vehicles. The removal of this fourth vehicle would have a ripple effect, creating a cost, time, and effort savings throughout the logistical configuration of the division. Further, a three-tank platoon would allow for easier deployment of armor assets overseas by improving space availability on air or sea transports.

Manning of the three-vehicle tank platoon would not change dramatically from current manning schemes. The three-tank platoon would retain the lieutenant platoon leader, sergeant first class platoon sergeant, and a staff sergeant as a section leader. At first glance, this leadership structure appears to be heavy. Given current demands for faster paced (challenging) and varied combat and non-standard operations using digital systems against potentially extremely capable opposing forces, the leader-to-led ratio must increase, starting in the tank platoon. The typical roles of each leader position would not change significantly within the three-vehicle tank platoon.

The three-vehicle tank platoon creates a number of issues that must be addressed when considering this idea for implementation. The withdrawal of a tank and tank crew affects the availability of soldiers in an already limited organization. The reality of current manning levels, however, often shows that this crew is already missing from many platoons and companies. In fact, given the difficulties in recruiting and retention that currently plague the Army — and will continue to do so in the future because of austere defense funding and a strong civilian economy — the three-tank platoon actually increases the chance that armor platoons will be fully manned, despite reduced personnel intake, because fewer spaces will need to be filled.

Another issue is that the leadership dynamic learned by leading within a four-vehicle platoon would be absent. The importance of this point is debatable in terms of platoon leader development. Does one less vehicle create a less capable platoon leader? Probably not. The counter-argument is that a three-tank unit allows the platoon leader to better focus his time and resources, in garrison and in the field, to maximize his training and maintenance efforts. If the platoon has four tanks but no crew to man the fourth vehicle and/or if the fourth vehicle is deadlined due to cost-driven supply constraints, this point is moot anyway.

Lastly, the concept of massed armor operations like those planned in Europe and those carried out in Southwest Asia would no longer be possible due to the overall reduction in tank numbers resulting from the introduction of the three-tank platoon. Current and future threats, however, do not appear to offer the kind of Cold War challenge that required fielding massed armored formations on the battlefield.

In terms of actual experience with this concept, the structural shift from a four-tank platoon to a three-tank platoon has been successfully implemented by the Swiss Army. Their Army 95 reform reconfigured the size of the Swiss military based upon the post-Cold War security environment. The introduction of the German Leopard II tank provided the Swiss a combat platform similar to the M1A2 to give impetus to this change. Simultaneously, the creation of consolidated armored formations at the brigade level allowed for a concentration of firepower to overcome the loss of one cannon at the platoon level.

One of the key outcomes of Swiss Army 95 reform was a major reduction in training time for combat units. The Swiss Army is essentially a militia army based upon universal conscription with a very small cadre of professional instructors. Prior to Army 95 reform, most soldiers had three to four weeks of training at the unit level per year. With Army 95, this cycle changed to two weeks every second year for most combat arms formations. Simultaneously, both officer and noncommissioned officer basic training was reduced. With this reduction in training time, a three-tank platoon facilitates movement expertise, gunnery proficiency, and command and control for soldiers and leaders who receive a bare minimum of training and practice to maintain combat expertise. The reduction in firepower is compensated for in the new brigades, where all tanks are consolidated in one mobile unit under a division headquarters. Further, in terms of cost, the Swiss generate savings by having 10 tanks per company instead of 13. This reduction lowers direct purchase costs by requiring fewer vehicles and reduces logistics expenditures because of simplified maintenance.

The introduction of the three tank platoon for the Army XXI heavy division would be a revolutionary step in force structure reform. Defense industry lobbying and armor branch political considerations aside, a three-tank platoon structure simplifies command and control, creates cost savings logistically, optimizes reduced training time by simplifying gunnery and collective training, and places the platoon leader at the spearhead of his unit. In terms of manning, a three-vehicle platoon more closely correlates with the Army's current era of reduced manpower. Although the benefits of the three-tank platoon apply to the Total Force, RC armor units would benefit the most from the three-tank concept since it optimizes limited training time. This opportunity for force structure reform should be discussed and evaluated, but not overlooked, as we move towards Army XXI.

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